

How to Avoid the Five Traps That

Silently Kill Churches

A LEADERSHIP FABLE

THOM S. RAINER

FOREWORD BY CAREY NIEUWHOF



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CHURCH ANSWERS RESOURCES

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Where Have All the Church Members Gone?: How to Avoid the Five Traps That Silently Kill Churches

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To Maggie Rainer, my first granddaughter. Total joy, total love.

And always to Nellie Jo.

Your children stand up and bless you.

Your grandchildren acclaim you with joy.

Your husband marvels at such a gift of grace.

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Foreword

IF YOU'RE A PASTOR, you know that somehow everything has changed over the past few years. But you may not be quite sure *how* or *why* things have changed.

Where Have All the Church Members Gone? will help you put your finger on why people aren't attending church as often as they once did. Even more important, it will give you a blueprint for moving forward.

I recognized many of the trends that Thom Rainer outlines in this book. Though I work with a lot of American leaders, I grew up and live in Canada. So many characteristics of the post-Christian culture that defined my childhood and ministry are now typical of life in the US as well, even life in the Bible Belt.

Thom Rainer does a brilliant job of showing how those trends have taken hold in day-to-day small-town, small-church life—declining attendance, drifting beliefs, lesser involvement, and the devaluing of church attendance by many who used to attend regularly.

Those developments can all seem puzzling until you understand what's really going on. This book will help make clear what currently seems mysterious.

If you've been in ministry for a while, Thom will show you how to move forward to create a *new* church in an existing church that may have become a little too stuck in the past. If you're a seasoned pastor, like Oliver, the main character in the fable, this book will give you a fresh vision for the years remaining in your ministry.

It's a whole new world, and I'm grateful that you and I get to lead in it. Thom Rainer is a valuable guide in the midst of it all.

CAREY NIEUWHOF Author of At Your Best and host of the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast

Introduction

I HAVE CONSULTED WITH CHURCHES and worked with church leaders since 1988. Do you know what that means? First, it means I'm old. But it also means I have a lot of experience, having worked with thousands of churches and pastors.

Over the past several decades, I have noticed an emerging pattern of challenges and problems in churches, particularly in North America. Each church has its own distinct context and characteristics, but they have many things in common as well. With unhealthy churches in particular, I began to see several common traps they had fallen into—traps that were silently killing them.

I continue to be amazed at how widespread these traps have become. It's not unusual to work with churches that have all five. Many more churches have three or four.

I'm also amazed by how few church leaders truly recognize the dysfunction in their churches. To be fair, these leaders are smart and caring and discerning. But for a number of reasons,

they are blind to the problems that are undermining their ministries. Often, their only context is their own church in their own community, and they typically don't have points of reference to compare their challenges to those of other churches—especially if they have been at the same church for a long time. There's something to be said for getting a fresh outside perspective from time to time.

When COVID-19 hit, we saw an acceleration and exacerbation of the negative trends in many churches. Before COVID, our Church Answers team received about one request a week for a consultation. Since the pandemic, it's not unusual to get three or four requests in a week. The small cracks in the ministry foundation of many churches were not so noticeable until they suddenly became major fissures from an earthquake of cultural changes. Most of our consultation requests now don't begin with "Are we healthy?" They begin with "What happened to us?!"

This book looks at five traps that can silently kill a church. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these five traps are some of the most common found in struggling churches.

It's fair to ask how many churches are struggling today. The answer is an ambiguous "many," depending on how you define *church health*. Using the metrics described in this book, I would say that as many as 85 percent of American churches are unhealthy to a significant degree.

While that may sound like a dire proclamation, the situation is not hopeless by any means. As the body of Christ, the

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church has the power of God behind us and the hope we find in Jesus Christ.

The title we've chosen, Where Have All the Church Members Gone?, might suggest that a numerical measure of membership and attendance provides an accurate gauge of church health. In reality, the problems are much deeper than a superficial measure of attendance. Nevertheless, declining attendance can be, and usually is, a symptom of deeper problems.

That is where our story begins—in a fictional but true-to-life church in Rolesville, North Carolina, a real town in a beautiful location not far from Raleigh. My hope and prayer is that you will be able to immerse yourself in the story and relate to each of the characters. By using an allegory, I hope to awaken you to possible problems and challenges in your own church.

One thing is certain: You cannot begin to change until you understand and acknowledge that you *need* to change.

In the last chapter, I will recap and discuss the five traps in detail—from a nonfictional perspective—and I will point you and your church toward possible solutions. Indeed, my team and I will provide updated solutions regularly at our website: Where Have All The Church Members Gone.com.

The local church is not a typical organization; it is built on the foundation of Christ's work, and it continues through the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope you will hear clearly that *every* church must depend on the power of God, and we must diligently pursue God's will through the power of prayer.

Speaking of prayer, I began praying for you before this book

was even published. I have prayed for the church you represent. I have prayed that this book will point you to confront with courage the challenges your church faces. But mostly I have prayed that you will see that no challenge is insurmountable in the power of Christ.

Now it's time to introduce you to Pastor Oliver Wagner, the well-intentioned pastor of Connection Church. I hope you'll like him. I'm almost certain you will identify with him.

It is time to answer the question "Where have all the church members gone?"

1

A NAGGING UNCERTAINTY

OLIVER WAGNER LEANED BACK in his padded office chair and took a deep breath—but it came out as more of a sigh. Though he'd been a pastor for more than three decades, he had never before felt such uncertainty and apprehension. A month earlier, he had notched his eighth year as lead pastor of Connection Church, and at age fifty-nine, he sincerely hoped this church would be his last. He loved the people, loved the community, and he and Melanie were happy there. Their three grown sons were all married now and doing well—and the five grandchildren, with number six on the way, were a total joy. The empty-nest phase had turned out to be not all that empty because he and Melanie had become on-call babysitters for the grandkids—and loved it.

The church had a good reputation in the community of Rolesville, North Carolina, a town of about ten thousand not far from Raleigh. When Oliver first arrived at the church, the area was already in the midst of significant transition, growing from a small agricultural community into a rapidly expanding suburban town. At first, most of the members of Connection Church were the old guard of the community; but the past eight years had brought a healthy number of new members—people new to the area, many drawn by Rolesville's proximity to Research Triangle Park. Oliver considered the blend of old and new at the church a blessing.

And yet, something wasn't quite right. Oliver sensed it more than knew it, and he wished he could put his finger on the exact cause.

To be sure, there had been some challenges along the way. The first few years had been the toughest as he led the church through a name change—from Hanson Memorial Church, after a major donor to the church's first building campaign more than eighty years ago, to the current Connection Church—and Oliver had tried unsuccessfully to start a new members class. That one still bothered him, because he'd never understood the resistance that arose from some of the congregation's old guard. But being a conflict avoider by nature, he hadn't pushed it, and things had eventually settled down. The church seemed to be doing fine now, and the conflicts were comparatively few—certainly nothing out of the ordinary.

So why am I so uneasy?

A NAGGING UNCERTAINTY

When he had first started feeling this way, he thought maybe God was calling him to another church. But after several long and prayerful conversations with Melanie, they both concluded that they were to stay at Connection Church. They were willing to move if they sensed God's will in it, but they hadn't discerned any prompting in that direction.

Oliver pushed his thoughts aside and reached for his Bible. He always tried to anchor his mornings with an hour of prayer and Scripture reading before moving on to the demands of the day—and though he wasn't always successful, and often felt guilty for his lack of consistency, today had started off well. He took encouragement from the Gospel of Matthew and prayed for several concerns that had come up during the week. But soon his mind began to wander back to other thoughts and distractions.

What is wrong with me? Why am I unable to concentrate? And why do I feel so unsettled about the church when everything seems to be in good order? At least on the surface . . .

With a sudden burst of energy, Oliver set his Bible aside, cleared some room on his desk by stacking the books he had gathered to help with sermon preparation, and pulled out a fresh yellow legal pad and his favorite pen. With no particular plan other than to brainstorm, he began jotting some notes as things came to mind about the church.

Drawing a line down the middle of the page, he wrote "400+ Members" on one side and "~200 Weekly Attendance" on the other. He had never been much of a numbers guy, not wanting

to get caught up in the attendance trap, counting nickels and noses as signs of success. But still, the gap between membership and attendance was eye-opening. COVID-19 had certainly had an effect on church attendance, and like a lot of churches, Connection Church had been slow to bounce back after the pandemic. But that was several years ago now, and Oliver knew they couldn't keep blaming things on COVID. There had to be more to it than that.

On the left-hand side of the page, he added the word "Ministries," with a corresponding "Trouble Finding Volunteers" on the right.

Though the church still kept a full slate of ministries and activities, it was tougher than ever to find enough willing volunteers.

But that's the nature of the world today, he reasoned. Every family is so incredibly busy.

There were several dozen young families in the church, and they were among the busiest. And even when people did volunteer, they didn't always follow through as expected. In fact, just last week, one of the preschool Sunday school leaders told Oliver that three people had failed to show up for their time slots. No notification. No apologies. They just didn't come.

And then there was *giving*—again, not something he wanted to focus on too much, as long as the bills were getting paid. Which they were. But while the tithe had held pretty steady during the pandemic—maybe because people weren't spending as much on other things—there had been a noticeable decline in the offering over the past eighteen months.

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People just don't seem as enthusiastic about, or committed to, the church as they once did, he mused. But of course a pastor's going to say that, right? Maybe I should get a second opinion.

He retrieved his phone from under a stack of papers on his desk and scrolled through his contacts until he found the number for Jorge Miranda, perhaps the most key influencer in the church. Jorge was a long-serving elder, well-respected in the congregation, and though the elders rotated the chairman's role, he was the de facto leader even when he wasn't in charge. Connection Church was largely congregational in polity, but the elders still had significant influence. Jorge had a very successful business in the community and was often in demand for speaking engagements and to counsel other business leaders. He was known as a straight shooter, and Oliver felt confident in going to him for help.

"Hey, Pastor," Jorge said when he picked up the phone. "What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping I could stop by and talk to you this afternoon," Oliver replied. "There's something I want to run by you."

"Okay, I have some time today. Tell you what: I'll swing by the church around two."



"Thanks for taking the time, Jorge," Oliver began as the two men settled into the overstuffed armchairs in the pastor's office. "With all the responsibilities you have, I try not to bother you, but I needed an ear and maybe some advice."

Jorge smiled and nodded. "I always have time for you, Oliver, and I'm always happy to help. What's on your mind?"

"My problem," Oliver said, "is one that that I don't quite know how to articulate. I just have a sense that something's not right. I'm really restless and finding myself distracted. And I think it has to do with how things are going with the church. It feels like people are coming, but their hearts aren't in it—at least not the way they used to be."

"I agree," Jorge interjected.

Oliver was surprised by Jorge's quick response. He had planned to offer further clarification, and he was a bit taken aback by the abruptness of Jorge's agreement.

"Look, Oliver, I sense it too. I've been at the church a long time, through good times and bad. But we are in a period now that is unlike any other I can recall. I want to say it's apathy, but that doesn't quite explain it. But something is definitely not right."

Oliver liked the fact that he wasn't alone in his uneasiness. *At least I'm not going crazy!* But he wasn't sure how comfortable he was knowing that the most influential person in the congregation felt that something was wrong with the church.

"I think the fact that we're both feeling the same way means that God is trying to get our attention," Jorge continued. "We need to act on it."

Oliver was not surprised by Jorge's call to action. The business leader was nothing if not decisive, even if he didn't have an immediate answer.

A NAGGING UNCERTAINTY

"I just wish I had a better understanding of how to lead this church into the future," Oliver said. "I mean, this is still the Bible Belt, but it feels as if everything else in the culture is shifting around us."

"Well, Pastor," Jorge said with a slight twinkle in his eye, "I don't think God intends for you to figure it out all on your own. If you want my advice, I suggest we assemble a small team from a cross section of the congregation—maybe six or eight people, to keep it manageable—to discuss and pray about the direction of the church. I'm confident that God will show us the reasons for our discomfort and will lead us in the way we should go."

Oliver immediately warmed to the idea. "I've been thinking about creating a long-term planning committee to look at the church's next ten years," he said. "By then, I'll likely be ready to pass the baton of pastoral leadership and guide the church through a fruitful transition to a new pastor."

"Honestly, I was thinking of something more focused and short-term," Jorge replied. "Like a task force. I've always believed that churches should have very few ongoing committees—usually just finance and personnel. As soon as you put the words *long-term* and *committee* together, you risk ending up with a group that will last beyond its usefulness and become just another meeting for meeting's sake."

"I think we can agree that we don't need another one of those," Oliver said with a laugh.

"I also don't think we need to connect that plan directly with

your own future," Jorge continued. "Our current focus should be on finding an answer to the uneasiness we're both feeling. What say we get a date on the calendar, and let's each invite two or three stakeholders from the congregation to join the group."

Ever the optimist, Oliver was quick to agree. But he could not have imagined where this idea would lead. If he had known, he might have stopped everything and learned to live with his restlessness and the status quo.

Yes, there would be some exceedingly difficult days ahead.